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ABSTRACT

A study examined significant deliberate learning activities (as demonstrated in learning projects) which were related to spiritual growth. (Spiritual growth was defined in broad terms within which each interviewee interpreted his or her own concept.) Fifty persons between the ages of thirty-five and fifty-five and representing five groups (three churches, an educational agency, and respondents to a newspaper advertisement) were asked to characterize their learning efforts in terms of listed words related to spiritual growth. Interviewees were asked to provide further information about their spiritual growth and certain aspects of their learning experiences. The various learning projects reported included psychiatry, Bible study, the occult, Hinduism, the dance, and racism. Twenty percent indicated that all their learning efforts were related to their spiritual growth, and sixty-six percent indicated that fifty percent or more of their learning efforts had a connection with their spiritual growth. Other findings from the study include the following: a life crisis sometimes precedes and influences a learning project; there is at times the need for assistance on a one-to-one basis from a resource person and the need for group discussion opportunities; and there appears to be little or no use of object planned learning. Directions for further research are suggested. (DTT)

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ADULT LEARNING PROJECTS RELATED TO SPIRITUAL GROWTH

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This paper describes a study which undertook to examine significant deliberate learning activities which were related to spiritual growth. The focus of the study was the type of learning activity which is included in the definitions by Tough (1971) of a "learning project".

The study was undertaken because of a personal interest in spiritual growth and the recent development of many learning activities in churches and other agencies which encompass this area.

Johnstone and Rivera (1965) felt it necessary to include religion, morals, and ethics as a separate category of subject matter in their comprehensive study of adult learning activities. This category included approximately 12% of all reported learning activities. They estimated that there were approximately 3,820,000 adults who were engaged in activities included in this learning category (p. 49).

Many universities and other educational agencies offer both credit and non-credit courses to those students who are interested in the philosophy of religion and the spiritual dimension of man. Religious groups and agencies of various kinds continue to develop and to offer activities to denominational, interdenominational, and non-denominational audiences. Lay schools of theology now offer courses which have content which was previously taught only in seminaries. Churches have study and discussion groups where questions of a spiritual nature are a central focus. Quasi-religious organizations, like the Transcendental Meditation group, attract large numbers of adults who seek knowledge of the spiritual dimension of life.

An attempt was made to avoid a narrow, sectarian bias because this study was concerned with spiritual growth in the wider sense of the meaning of the word spiritual. Spiritual growth was defined in broad

terms within which each respondent interpreted his or her own concept of human spiritual growth.

Fifty persons aged between 35 and 55 years took part in an interview. After a list of learning efforts was made, each respondent read a sheet containing words related to spiritual growth. Then he or she was asked, "Were any of your learning efforts in these areas of concern or seeking?". The response to this question was recorded against the list of efforts which had already been assembled.

It was also decided to obtain detailed information on one project per respondent. If several efforts were identified, the process of elimination would continue by asking for the one project from this group "where it was the most important project in terms of your spititual growth". After the focus on one effort had taken place, it was important to determine that this effort fitted all of the criteria for a learning project. Certain aspects of the learning project and the respondent's spiritual growth and personal background were discussed with an interviewer. The respondent was asked to provide some further information about his or her spiritual growth, certain aspects of the planning process, the main source of subject matter or content of the learning project, the main method of learning for the respondent, the total duration in hours, and any way in which the learning could have been improved.

The respondents who participated in the study came from five groups, with 10 respondents from each group. Three churches and an educational agency provided representation from among those persons who took part in their activities. A newspaper advertisement provided the fifth group of volunteers included in the study.

The learning project approach was chosen because it appeared to be flexible and useful for the examination of learning related to spiritual growth. New questions which were specifically related to spiritual growth fitted easily into the interview schedule. New categories were added to the questions on main source of subject matter and main method of learning.

There are several findings in this study which are worthy of note including the broad scope of learning efforts which were related to spiritual growth by the respondents, the wide variety of learning projects related to spiritual growth by the respondents, the total absence of any form of interest in credit, and the usefulness of some form of reflection or thought process to learning projects.

Most respondents in this study indicated that a large number of their learning efforts were somehow related to their spiritual growth. This meant simply that they believed that there was a connection, even though it was slight in some cases, between their learning efforts and their spiritual growth. Twenty per cent of the respondents stated that all of their learning efforts were related to their spiritual growth. Sixty-six per cent of the respondents indicated that 50 per cent or more of their learning efforts had a connection with their spiritual growth.

It is obvious from these figures that spiritual growth was important to the lives and the learning efforts of these respondents. Although the importance of spiritual growth to these respondents is attributable in part to the fact that they come from chosen groups, it should be noted that eight respondents from the group who replied to the newspaper advertisement also indicated that fifty per cent or more of their learning efforts were related to their spiritual growth.

The wide variety of learning projects which respondents reported in detail to the interviewers is also significant. These learning projects included those which had spiritual growth as a "very important reason" for involvement in the learning. The various learning projects reported included psychiatry, bible study, the occult, Hinduism, the dance, and racism.

A number of respondents reported learning projects which had deep meaning because they emerged from important aspects of the respondents' lives. They were connected with important issues and rooted in activities and beliefs which were central to the respondent.

Spiritual leaders must recognize the diversity of spiritual growth paths and learning efforts which are useful to learners. Situations which appear to the expert to be unrelated to spiritual growth often involve deep spiritual learning to the individual. These situations form the basis for opportunities for spiritual growth and learning; for example, involvement in a church dance group provided a unique opportunity for a woman whose life had found much of its expression and growth in the dance. When the individual context of this learning is understood, it begins to make perfect sense as an expression of and vehicle for spiritual growth and learning.

This study included a question about the motivation for some form of credit or accreditation for the respondent in the learning project. Other learning project research has also included reference to the role of credit or formal recognition of the learning by an institution or its representative. This is the only learning project study where the desire for some form of credit was ignored completely by all of the respondents.

Although there were three respondents who made use of the credit course offerings in the university to pursue their learning related to spiritual growth, there was no interest whatsoever indicated in the credit aspect of these courses. The degree of satisfaction with the credit course was mixed as one respondent expressed much dissatisfaction while the other two derived some satisfaction from the courses.

The subject matter area of this study is doubtless a factor in the lack of desire for some form of credit. When a learner is concerned about the deep spiritual questions which affect every part of life, he or she is likely to have little interest in other facets of the learning experience such as credit.

There were new categories added to the question about main method of learning which allowed for the recognition of the reflective process, including prayer, contemplation and formal meditation. Some form of reflection on the content of learning emerged as an important method of learning for the respondents in this study. Twenty-six respondents indicated one of these as either the main method of learning or one of the mixed main methods of learning.

Because prayer involves focussing of the mind upon a particular issue or concern within a formal structuring of thought processes, it functioned as a learning method by focussing the mind on the content area of the learning project to the exclusion of other issues within the context of a relationship with the spiritual dimension. It was considered in the context of this study to be a form of reflection like formal meditation or contemplation.

The process of reflection on the content of the learning project was

as important for the majority of respondents in this study as the process of assimilating the content material of the learning project. It was the reflection process which enabled the respondents to understand more fully the nature of the content of the learning project. Much of the richness of the learning project would have been lost without these opportunities for reflection.

Two new questions which were added to this study dealt with the planning time for the learning project and the degree of satisfaction with time spent in planning by the respondents.

One-third of the respondents in this study indicated that they had invested a considerable amount of time in planning their learning projects; however, a larger number of respondents indicated that they had spent very little time in planning. This wide variation requires further investigation. There is far too little known about the ways in which people plan their learning projects. This particular question ought to be included in future learning project research where it is possible to provide more data for further investigation.

A large majority of respondents in this study indicated a high degree of satisfaction with their planning time. Only four per cent of the respondents felt that they had spent too much time in planning while 26 per cent stated that they had spent too little. This latter group felt that their planning was inadequate because insufficient time had been spent in carrying out the planning.

There are a number of findings in this study which should be of interest to those persons who are involved in church work or in other helping professions.

The first comes from study of the events which preceded a number of the learning activities. A number of respondents reported that a life crisis such as alcoholism, marriage breakdown, and/or the death of others had preceded and influenced their learning projects. These respondents had chosen to take part in these learning projects because of the impact of these events upon their life situation. Their search for understanding and knowledge arose from their experiences. These learning projects were intended to redirect the lives of the respondents. Some had received professional assistance in dealing with their problems and in some cases, the professional assistance continued as a resource in the long term learning project.

Church workers and others from the helping professions need to consider the potential for the extension of the pastoral or counselling function beyond initial assistance into learning for the spiritual growth of the client. The initial stage will be a recognition of the spiritual implications within any serious event in a client's life.

The most able therapist or counsellor will take these spiritual factors into consideration when assisting the client to deal with the initial problem. The training of the secular therapists or counsellor should include opportunities to explore spiritual growth and its relationship to them and to their future client. To ignore this aspect of the helping relationship is to ignore a very important part of the client's being.

Another finding of this study which is of importance to religious leaders and other professionals concerned with spiritual growth and learning comes from the answers to the question about ways of improving the learning project. A number of respondents indicated a need for

assistance on a one-to-one basis from some type of knowledgeable person to improve their learning. This person was not expected to be a director or primary planner of the learning but a source of ideas and possible directions. Although many of the respondents in this study had had some access to a person with this potential, they had been unable to take full advantage of him or her. The resource persons for the church and university extension groups included clergy and teachers who were considered to be most able. Yet they were obviously not used as fully or appropriately as possible in the learning projects which were reported.

There was also a number of respondents who cited the need for more group discussion opportunities in order to improve their learning projects. This is an interesting finding when one considers the fact that most of the respondents had come from institutions which supposedly provided opportunities for discussion. The University Extension classes however provided neither adequate resources nor adequate opportunities for discussion for their participants. The respondents from the church groups reported this problem with their learning as well.

Another finding which is of particular importance to churches is the absence of the use of object planned learning by the respondents in this study. Several churches provide extensive programs which can be followed by individuals and/or groups. These programs range from daily reading programs to group sessions on religious issues. No respondent referred at any time in their reporting of learning projects or learning efforts to these types of programs. This study does not include a wide range of groups which use various forms of individualized learning programs nor does it represent a wide range of members of the United,

Roman Catholic or Unitarian Churches. It is recommended that members of these and other denominations which produce individualized learning programs give careful consideration to their use by their members. A study of these programs by each denomination should reveal the use and value of these programs.

Three directions for further research are indicated by this study. Two would assist in the development of a better understanding of the relationship between learning and spiritual growth. The third involves learning project research and its potential development in relation to specific subject matter or content areas.

The first direction for further research concerns the relationship between learning and spiritual experience. The Charismatic group was the only group where reference was often made to spiritual or mystical experiences and their impact on learning.

This study did not contain any direct references to learning efforts which were not encompassed within the definition of a learning project. Thus shorter learning efforts directed at spiritual growth were not included. Fortuitous learning experiences where no conscious decision to learn something was made also were not a part of the study. A more complete understanding of spiritual growth and learning will be achieved however when more is known about short term and fortuitous learning related to spiritual growth.

This study concentrated on a particular subject matter area for learning. Previous learning project research has not dealt as extensively with learning projects in this way, but rather has most often dealt with specific client groups. The results of previous research have been most useful.

Future learning project research might use categories such as those developed by Johnstone and Rivera (1965) to discover any difference in the patterns of learning projects in different subject matter areas. It would be useful to compare the responses to questions in different categories of learning projects about the primary planner, the main source of subject matter, the main method of learning, the number of hours spent, and the potential ways of improving the learning project. It would also be useful to be able to compare different categories of learning projects on the basis of those events which lead up to involvement.

A Final Statement

There is an enormous opportunity for many religious and secular institutions and agencies to deal with the spiritual needs of adult learners on a more systematic basis. These institutions and agencies can begin to use their resources in order to further explore their potential role in this vital aspect of the human dimension. These institutions and agencies must develop further the resources which they have at their disposal to meet the learning needs of the many individuals who approach them with trust and a strong desire to learn.

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